



Introduction: Plato's Music

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When I was asked to contribute an issue to the *Literature and Aesthetics* series on great thinkers in aesthetics, I did not appreciate how difficult it might be to put together a volume on Plato. Originally my plan was simply to call the volume *Plato's Aesthetics*, or *Plato on Art and Beauty*. I came to realise, however, that Plato was not driven to write about art from an interest in aesthetics (at least not aesthetics as we know it), and that the terms 'art' and 'beauty' are very inaccurate descriptors for what Plato was "on about", as they say here in Australia. The fact is that Plato is concerned with all sorts of matters that walk under the umbrella of literature and aesthetics—poetry, drama, myth, music, painting, perspective, attractiveness, organicity, creativity, criticism, truth, and philosophy—and the terms 'aesthetics', 'art', and 'beauty' convey only a small portion of them. What was needed was a more comprehensive conception of Plato's interest.

The title *Images of Excellence* was already taken, however, by Chris Janaway's excellent book on Plato's critique of the arts.¹ Looking at Plato's interest from the point of view of human experience with images nicely picks out a fundamental Platonic concern. For Plato, imagination is the most basic form of human cognition.² Images are a necessary feature of communication,³ and even the most philosophical intuition has a difficult time laying them aside.⁴ It stands to reason, then, that the ways in which poetry, myth, painting and all the arts use images should be a focus for Plato. In addition, Janaway's choice of the term 'excellence' reminds us of Plato's constant orientation towards improvement and perfection in all areas. Much of Plato's criticism of the arts stems from his view that they are not fundamentally directed towards improvement, but at best towards gratification and at worst towards appeal to the lowest common denominator.

Despite its illuminating terms, however, the title *Images of Excellence*

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does not quite pick out what I think is Plato's real focus on the arts. It emphasises the products of artwork, rather than their function and purpose. Moreover, to focus on Plato's critique of the arts, as Janaway does, fails to acknowledge the artistry of Plato's own writings and their expression of what Plato values most in this area. I think that most of what passes as Plato's aesthetics or Plato's critique of the arts in today's philosophical literature really ought to be considered under the heading of Plato's music (*mousikê*). More often than not, when Plato examines art, art theory, art criticism, literary criticism or aesthetics, he does so in the special context of music. This is true even in places where he writes about painting or sculpture, two arts (*technai*) that are not strictly speaking part of ancient music. So, then, what is music for Plato?

Music, as Plato understood it, came as close as anything in his culture did to embracing what we would call "the arts" today. It included epic and lyric poetry, all forms of drama including tragedy, comedy, and choral odes, as well as all other musical accompaniment, dance, and song. Yet once it is taken into account that poetry was always sung,⁵ and that drama always involved singing and dancing,⁶ it becomes clear that the emphasis of ancient music was on what we now call the performing arts; indeed, on those with a distinctively musical component. Notably absent from ancient music are the fine arts: prose literature, painting, sculpture, architecture. Thus, given that modern aesthetics and literary criticism is dominated by discussion of painting, sculpture, architecture, and prose literature it might appear inappropriate to talk about Plato's views on literature and aesthetics at all. That, I think, would be going too far, but the distinction between literature-and-aesthetics, on the one hand, and music on the other is crucial to understanding Plato's focus in all his writing about the arts, including those contexts in which his concern is with beauty (*to kalon*) in general, or with aesthetic properties or reasons *per se*.

The distinction between aesthetics and music is not as obvious as it might appear, however. Superficially, as we have just seen, it tracks our distinction between performing arts and fine arts. The fact that it does track our distinction, however, is to a certain extent an accident of the development of Greek culture. In fact, there is no particular reason why





Greek prose literature, painting, sculpture and even architecture might not have been incorporated into a conception of performing arts, and in that sense into a conception of music. Let me briefly try to show how this could be done.

The case of prose literature is somewhat more complicated than that of painting, sculpture and architecture, because its evolution as a distinct genre from poetry was only beginning in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE, through the writing of historical, philosophical and rhetorical works. Nevertheless, the development of prose literature shows clear signs of association with performance art. Rhetorical works, for example, *were* clearly performance pieces in their own right.⁷ They were intended to be declaimed before large audiences, for the enjoyment and approval of the crowd. Early works in history and philosophy, by contrast, including those written in verse, such as the works of Parmenides and Empedocles, would hardly count as performance pieces in the same sense,⁸ but nor would they count straightforwardly as literature in our sense of the term.⁹ The dialogues of Plato present an entirely different story, of course, and I shall return to them later. For now we may note at least that Plato himself would probably have associated them with performance. Indeed, he uses the delectable irony of metafiction, to suggest that his own dialogues should replace poetry in the education of the young. As the Athenian Stranger tells his interlocutors in the *Laws*:

As I look back on the discourse you and I have been holding ever since daybreak until this moment--and I really believe there has been some divine guiding about the matter--well, be that as it may, our converse has been, to my mind, just like a kind of poem. I dare say there is nothing surprising in my having felt this keen pleasure in reviewing this compact formation, as I may call it, of discourse of my own composition. The fact is that of all the many compositions I have met with or listened to, in verse or in plain prose, I find it the most satisfactory and the most suitable for the ears of the young. So I really think I could not direct our curator of law and minister of education to a better standard, or bid him do better than instruct his schoolmasters to teach it to their pupils ... (811c-e; trans. Taylor)

Note that the treatment here of Platonic dialogue as “just like a kind





of poem" (*pantapasi poiêsei tini prosomoiôs*, 811c9-10), and the explicit references to it as discourse to be "listened to" (*akêkoa*, 811d3) by the "ears of the young" (*akouein neois*, 811d5), strongly suggest that even a Platonic dialogue was a piece of performance art (in the most general sense) and not literature to be read and considered silently as we do today. Ancient Greek prose literature, then, with some exceptions and qualifications, could be fit under the performing arts rather than the fine arts. The same may be said for painting, sculpture and architecture.

Greek painting, at least all the painting that Plato appears to have been concerned with,¹⁰ has clear connections with performance art. The most obvious example is scene painting, which was used predominantly in the theatre.¹¹ Other kinds of painting, including panel painting and wall painting, generally depict narratives.¹² In Attic vase painting, pictorial narrative composition is common, featuring both monoscenic and synoptic narrative.¹³ Much of the content of pictorial narrative coincides with the myths and legends of epic poetry. Painted vases depicting symposiasts singing lyric poems (including painted verse) are also common,¹⁴ again suggesting a close connection between painting and performance. Sculpture, too, very often depicts mythic narrative, the Parthenon marbles and the Laocoon group providing two of the best known examples. Sculpture, moreover, played an important role in religious festivals, providing narrative context for processions like the Panathenaia. The temple buildings themselves were incorporated into these performances; their design and layout were planned with religious performance in mind.

In this way it can be seen that practically all of the arts of Classical Greece were involved in or associated with performance in one way or another. Let the poetic arts be primary, it is still the case that the remaining arts may be seen as analogous forms. Accordingly, if 'music' *were* intended just to mean the same thing as 'performing arts', it could incorporate literature, painting, sculpture and architecture as well. Although there would remain a difference in focus between Plato and the present day (e.g., on performance-related matters over product-related ones) we could talk about Plato's views on art in general without too much distortion. But it





turns out that the exclusion of painting, sculpture and architecture from music is not based on their status as fine arts, as opposed to performing arts. We need to look deeper than that.

When we examine the dialogues of Plato we find that painting, sculpture and architecture are largely treated as technical rather than musical arts. The reason for that has less to do with a principle for distinguishing art forms and more to do with enculturation. The essential difference between music and other forms of art, for Plato, was that music was to be learned and performed by every gentleperson (*kalos k'agathos*),¹⁵ whereas painting and sculpture were only to be learned professionally, by apprenticeship.¹⁶ From the time they began school, Athenian children were sent to the poetic *grammatists* and *kitharists* to learn music. They were required to learn poetry for the purpose of character formation. At a later age they learned to play the lyre and sing lyric poems, again with a view towards producing a gracious, cultured, and well-tempered character.¹⁷ Plato's Protagoras, in the dialogue named for him goes so far as to say that "rhythm and harmonious adjustment are essential to the whole of human life" (*Protagoras* 326b5-6, trans. Guthrie). Here we can see what I mentioned earlier as an accident of Greek culture. We could easily imagine painting as well as sculpture being a required part of a liberal education. As it is, they were not, and so did not form part of what was considered music.

So far as I can tell, Plato does not question the contingent dissociation of the fine arts from musical education. He accepts his culture's basic conception of what sort of thing music is and what it includes. When he proposes his programs of education in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, he does not radically alter the kind of curriculum to be emplaced. (I dare say he agrees completely with Protagoras' statement above.) What he does alter is the specific content of poetry, drama, and music in general, based on philosophical reasons, some of which are aesthetic reasons. For all that, Plato's interest in music, which we now understand as an interest in education, is more fundamental than his interest in art. And music as a form of education is essentially end-oriented. That is why we do not see discussions of art for art's sake in Plato. To the extent that he realises that art *can* be produced for no other aim than to delight the





senses, he thinks of such works negatively, as "harmless".¹⁸ His focus however is always on art for the sake of education; that is, not for the sake of aesthetic beauty, but for the sake of the production of genuinely noble, or beautiful, or graceful, or fine character. Virtually all of Plato's discussion of music is subordinated to this paedagogic aim. Most of his discussions of painting and sculpture are related to it as well, since Plato regularly introduces painting and sculpture as analogies or illustrations of more general points about culture and education. The beauty of character (to adumbrate) at which Plato's music aims is not exclusively a moral property or an aesthetic one. It is the perfection, as far as is possible, of what it is to be a human being. To have even a chance at attaining such perfection, philosophy is necessary, in order to grasp the "what it is" of a human being. In this way, philosophy becomes part of music, indeed its most fundamental part. Plato's philosophy is music, albeit music in a rare and different tune.

This volume is about what Plato saw in music, including his own, that might be conducive to the perfection of character. Some of these things are properties of the works themselves. Some are features of makers and performers. Some are concerned with the audience. Others with relations between all three. Virtually all of them lead us back to Plato's attempts to understand "what is", whether by that we mean what is real, what is true, what is one, or what is good. Ultimately, these cannot be separated. What readers should keep in mind if they want to see this collection as a whole, is the connection between "what is" and education in Plato. For him, education is a matter of turning the mind of a learner "from the world of becoming ... like the scene-shifting periactus in the theater, until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence and the brightest region of being." (*Republic* 518c8-10, trans. Shorey).

Readers should be forewarned, however, that I did not even try to assemble a volume that presents a uniform approach to Plato. I think that would do him a disservice. Instead I sought a variety of the best articles on Plato's music I could obtain, from any source. I am very proud of the contributions. Some of them are hard-hitting analytical treatments, some are close readings of the dialogues as drama, some are





expansive illuminations of Plato the person, some are loving expositions of beautiful ideas. The real Plato can be seen through all of these lenses; the kaleidoscopic view that results, disorienting as it is at first, is, I think, necessary to the appreciation of Plato. It seems to me that the anonymous commentator on Platonic philosophy saw as much when he wrote:

*Plato himself, shortly before his death, had a dream of himself as a swan, darting from tree to tree and causing great trouble to the fowls, who were unable to catch him. When Simmias the Socratic heard this dream he explained that everyone would endeavour to grasp Plato's meaning; none, however, would succeed, but each would interpret him according to his own views ...*¹⁹

This dream would be a cause for despair only if our objective was to capture Plato and receive his knowledge directly into our souls. But the *Republic* tells us that education is not like this (518b-c), and if I am right about Plato's music, the dialogues were never written with that objective in mind. Plato's music emphasises activity over content. It emphasises performance over product. Listen, enjoy, think. There is wonderful music here.

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A final word is in order about the dedication of this volume.²⁰ When I was first beginning to prepare this issue, I asked for a contribution on the *Republic* from a promising young PhD student, Mairead Costigan. Longstanding members of the Sydney Society for Literature and Aesthetics will remember Mairead for her presentations at conferences, as well as for her article on Seneca's tragedy, *Medea*, that appeared in this journal in the year 2000.²¹ Mairead had completed her PhD and examination and was awaiting graduation when she died in a tragic accident in 2007. She had barely begun to show what she was capable of as a philosopher and a teacher. The loss of Mairead was devastating to all of us who were close to her; it is sad to know that she cannot now enter into life-long discussions with the philosophers represented here.

Notes

- 1 See Christopher Janaway, *Images of Excellence: Plato's Critique of the Arts*, Oxford, 1995. Janaway's subtitle emphasises criticism; to that extent he misses what motivates Plato most, but his emphasis on the role of images in Plato, and the focus on excellence as the *telos* of the arts, is fitting.





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- 2 See *Republic* 509d-511e, the simile of the divided line.
- 3 See *Critias* 106c, where Critias says that all speech is a form of picturing. See also *Republic* 515c-517a, the allegory of the cave. Notice that there is no communication except among the prisoners in the cave, and between them and the mad philosopher who returns there. One who journeys out of the cave does so alone, without anyone to speak to.
- 4 See *Symposium* 210a-212b, the *scala amoris* passage. Note that Diotima says the ascent involves great toil (*pantes ponoi*, 210e6), and expresses some doubt about even Socrates' ability to reach the final goal (210a). Note also that the beautiful finally beheld is without image. See also *Letter VII* 314d.
- 5 Poetry was sung in both public and private performances. In public the professional song-sewers of the day, the *rhapsodes*, fitted together stories from *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and other epic verse. Lyric poetry was performed both publicly, in choral odes, and privately in symposia. Both public and private performances were formal, however, in the sense of following the prescription of regulative custom.
- 6 The relation of drama to music and dance is readily observed in the etymology of the terms 'tragedy' (*trag-ôidia*, goat-song), 'comedy' (*kôm-ôidia*, revel-song), and 'chorus' (*choros*, a group of dancers).
- 7 The evidence of Plato's dialogues shows us that the *epideixis*, or rhetorical display speech, was a standard part of a sophist's (or rhetor's) public, professional performance. See *Apology* 19d-20a, *Hippias Major* 282b-d, *Protagoras* 316c-317d, *Gorgias* 447a-c, cf. *Republic* I.337d-e.
- 8 For the display performance of a philosophical work, see *Parmenides* 127a-d. Note also is the disputed status of Xenophanes (poet or philosopher?), whose hexameter, elegiac and iambic verses were clearly performance oriented, as in his sympotic poems. And whether or not Empedocles' poetry was performed, it was both popular and memorable, as can be seen from Aristotle's comment that some people can quote Empedocles even when drunk (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1147b).
- 9 There are possible exceptions, for example some of the tales of Herodotus' *Histories*, or Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, or the fables attributed to Aesop.
- 10 I can find no clear references in Plato to the more abstract art of the Geometric or Archaic periods.
- 11 For evidence of scene painting (*skênographia*) used in theatre see Aristotle, (*Poetics* 1449a18) and Vitruvius (*Praef. ad lib. vii*). For Plato's discussions of scene-paintings (*eskiagraphêmena*), see: *Republic* 523b6, 583b5, 586b8; *Parmenides* 165c7; *Laws* 663e2; cf. *Critias* 106c-107a.
- 12 For example, the *Pitsa Panels* (National Archaeological Museum, Athens), or the wall paintings at the *Tomb of the Diver* in Paestum.
- 13 For monoscenic narrative, see the Argos Krater fragment (Argos C149); For synoptic see the Spartan cup (CabMed 190), both of which depict the blinding of Polyphemus.
- 14 See for example Attic RF cup by Douris, 490, Athens 1357 (cf. Theognis 1365-66); or Attic RF amphora by Euphronios, Louvre G30 (cf. Sappho fr. 36); or
- 15 Indeed, in the *Laws* he says these arts are to be learned and performed by all citizens, male and female. The curriculum for education in the arts is laid out in *Laws* Book VII. Right from the start (788a) it is clear that both male and female citizens are to be educated; the program of education in the musical arts does not get underway until 797a.
- 16 See *Protagoras* 311c, cf. 312d, 322c-d.
- 17 See *Protagoras* 325-26.
- 18 See especially *Laws* 667d. See also *Philebus* 51b-52a; cf. *Hippias Major* 303e, *Republic* 357b,
- 19 *Anonymous Prolegomena* 1.29-35; (= Olympiodorus *In Alcib.* 2.156-162). See I. Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, Amsterdam 1962.
- 20 For the content of the dedication, I am indebted to James Ley.
- 21 Costigan, Mairead. "Seneca as Stoic", *Literature and Aesthetics*, 10 (2000), 105-126.

